

2021 NEAFCS Program Excellence through Research Award

“Barriers that Prevent Program Participants from Completing Expanded Foods and Nutrition Education Program (EFNEP) Food Talk Sessions.”

Program Excellence Through Research Award

Abstract

The Expanded Food and Nutrition Education Program (EFNEP) is a federal program that began in the 1960s under the National Institute for Food and Agriculture (NIFA). The University of Georgia Extension Service EFNEP program created and implemented the Food Talk curriculum for adults, which is an interactive educational series of eight sessions, encouraging participants to try new recipes and learn how to stretch their food dollars, improve nutrition practices, and prevent food-borne illness. Seven UGA EFNEP program supervisors from six rural and urban counties in Georgia conducted the qualitative study “Barriers that Prevent Program Participants from Completing Expanded Foods and Nutrition Education Program (EFNEP) Food Talk Sessions.” The study objectives were to determine what barriers prevent program participants from completing all eight EFNEP Food Talk Sessions and to obtain feedback on how the sessions could be improved.

Synopsis

This qualitative study was conducted between 2018-2020 using six separate focus groups (n = 46) in both urban and rural counties representing the four geographic regions of Georgia. Focus groups were comprised of 74% females and 26% males, ranging in age from 18-72 years old. Participants reported being 78% African American and 22% White or Caucasian. All participants were those who did not complete all eight sessions and interviews were conducted onsite where the Food Talk sessions were held. Each focus group interview lasted two hours, and

the interviews were audio recorded and transcribed. The constant comparative data analysis method, a systematic process comparing occurrences in data in order to develop themes or categories, was chosen for this study. Focus group participants were asked the following questions:

- (1) How did you hear about the Food Talk program?
- (2) Tell me about positive experiences you have had participating with Food Talk?
- (3) What did you like least about the Food Talk program?
- (4) What difficulties have you encountered trying to attend Food Talk sessions?
- (5) Who or what influenced your decision to participate in Food Talk sessions?
- (6) What influenced your decision to not complete all 8 Food Talk sessions?
- (7) What can we do to have better participation rates among EFNEP participants?
- (8) What would make the Food Talk program more beneficial for you and your family?
- (9) Is there anything else you would like to share?

Study participants were identified by EFNEP educators working in six counties. UGA Extension Supervising Agents conducted the focus groups. Researchers wanted to learn who or what influenced participation in the Food Talk sessions. The most common response was that participants felt it was important for their health and well-being.

Barriers to Program Retention

There were a series of questions regarding barriers that prevent program participants from completing EFNEP Food Talk sessions. Responses to the questions, “Why didn’t you complete all eight Food Talk sessions?” and “What could we have done to help you attend more sessions?” had overlapping discussion and much of the same responses. Themes that emerged were (1) lack of knowledge or resources, (2) scheduling, and (3) personal and family issues. From these

themes, 22% of participants expressed personal and family issues as the greatest barrier for completion, followed by better communication of scheduling changes by using different sources of communication such as email, phone call and texting.

Focus group participants were also asked to share experiences that were least-liked about the sessions. The most common response was related to the length or number of sessions. Two themes emerged across all six focus groups when asked to respond to the question, “What would make the Food Talk program more beneficial for you and your family?” (1) the desire for more recipes, and (2) a request for more interactive sessions. These answers were an indication of the need to revise the Food Talk curriculum. Other responses to food talk being more beneficial were the desire to prepare international and cultural foods and field trips to grocery stores.

Positive Experiences with Food Talk Sessions

Since the primary purpose of the study was to understand what prevents class participants from completing Food Talk sessions, researchers were interested to know the favorable experiences of participants. Participants cited (1) healthy eating, (2) resource management, and (3) tangible rewards as positive experiences. Focus group participants were very complimentary of EFNEP educators because EFNEP hires and trains instructional paraprofessionals who are indigenous to the target populations. Participants recalled specific learning interactions, such as, “She talked about the food that you buy. I mean how [are] you going to budget your money when you go to the grocery store to spend money.” Others made general comments of affection: “She's a real nice teacher.”

Conclusions

Based on our findings from the qualitative research study done between 2018-2020, EFNEP researchers concluded social media and other technology is needed to heighten

awareness and accessibility of the Food Talk sessions. Also, the Food Talk curriculum needed to include more hands-on activities and be culturally relevant to enhance participation and increase retention. All focus group results from this research will be used to revise program sessions, increase the graduation rate, and improve participants' nutrition and health behaviors.

In order to address the findings, marketing has improved. Several sessions have been revised to be more culturally relevant. The Food Talk program has also added a virtual component and has a presence on social media. For future implications, the research study will be conducted with our non-English speaking groups and in more rural settings.

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